

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 14976

EXDIS

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TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION BEFORE SUMMER

1. EVENTS OF RECENT MONTHS AND PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS WITH KEY POLITICAL CONTACTS LEAD US TO THE CONCLUSION THAT A GENERAL ELECTION IS PROBABLE BEFORE THE SUMMER.

2. THERE HAS BEEN MOUNTING SPECULATION DURING THE PAST MONTH THAT THE CONTINUING CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE COAL MINERS AND SOME RAILWAYMEN COULD LEAD TO A GENERAL ELECTION IN THE NEAR TERM, POSSIBLY AS EARLY AS FEBRUARY. THIS IS CERTAINLY A POSSIBLE SCENARIO, ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT EAGER TO CALL AN ELECTION IN CONDITIONS OF SUCH STRIFE THAT THE CAMPAIGN WOULD INEVITABLY BE DEEPLY ACRIMONIOUS AND DIVISIVE. IT WOULD PREFER TO REACH A SETTLEMENT WITHIN THE TERMS OF PHASE III, THUS GAINING THE POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVANTAGES OF APPEARING AS A STRONG GOVERNMENT CAPABLE OF FACING DOWN THE UNIONS, AND THEN SELECT AN ELECTION DATE A BIT LATER, PERHAPS IN THE EARLY SPRING.

3. THE THINKING OF GOVERNMENT AND CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP, WHILE ACCEPTING THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ELECTION RESULTING FROM THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS CONFRONTATION, IS INFLUENCED MORE BY FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS OF BASIC ECONOMIC TRENDS AND MEDIUM AND

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LONG TERM PROSPECTS. THE LEADERSHIP NOW ACCEPTS THAT THE

COMBINATION OF ADVERSE ECONOMIC FACTORS -- PRIMARILY GREATLY INCREASED WORLD COMMODITY PRICES, AND THE SHARP RISE IN OIL PRICES -- MAKES IT HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT THE LONG-HELD OBJECTIVE OF TORY STRATEGY CAN BE ACHIEVED. THAT OBJECTIVE HAD BEEN SUSTAINED ECONOMIC GROWTH RESULTING BEFORE THE NEXT ELECTION IN THE HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING EVER ATTAINED IN THIS COUNTRY. ONLY A FEW MONTHS AGO, THAT GOAL STILL SEEMED FEASIBLE, BUT NOW THE SITUATION HAS BEEN ALTERED FUNDAMENTALLY AND TIME IS NO LONGER WORKING IN FAVOR OF THE GOVERNMENT. THE PROSPECTS ARE FOR A SUBSTANTIAL DOWNTURN IN THE MONTHS AHEAD WITH A LARGE TRADE AND BALANCE OF PAYMENTS DEFICIT AND ALL THE CONSEQUENCES THAT WILL HAVE FOR DOMESTIC PROGRAMS. THUS, IN THE VIEW OF GOVERNMENT AND PARTY LEADERSHIP, THE RADICALLY ALTERED CONDITIONS REQUIRE NEW AND DIFFICULT MEASURES TO LIMIT THE DAMAGE OF HARDER TIMES AHEAD. POLITICALLY THIS MEANS THE NECESSITY OF GOING TO THE PEOPLE WITH AN ASSESSMENT OF FUTURE PROSPECTS AND ASKING FOR A MANDATE FOR A NEW PLATFORM. THE TIME TO DO THIS IS BEFORE THE FULL FORCE OF ADVERSITY HAS BEEN FELT.

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